

One Young Man

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*The simple and true story of a clerk who
enlisted in 1914, who fought on the Western
Front for nearly two years, was severely
wounded at the Battle of the Somme, and
is now on his way back to his desk*

EDITED BY

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"THE LIFE OF SIR GEORGE WILLIAMS."

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TO THE GREATLY BELOVED MEMORY

OF

ONE YOUNG MAN

WHO FOUNDED THE Y.M.C.A.

MY UNCLE

SIR GEORGE WILLIAMS

FOREWORD

I am glad that this very personal little book is to be re-published, if only for private circulation, for it rings as true to-day as it did yesterday.

It tells the story of one young man in the Great War, but, in fact, it reveals no less the personality of the writer who knit the young man's story together.

The young man continues—the writer has passed on.

My brother is revealed here, not as the famous publisher, but as a man whose sympathy was so quick and passionate that he literally lived the suffering and trials of others.

It is this living sympathy, given so freely, that lies like a wreath of everlasting flowers on his memory now.

It is no longer a secret that the real name of the "Sydney Baxter" of this story is Reginald Davis; and those of us who know him and have watched every step of his progress, from his first small job of the [Pg viii] "pen and ledger" to the Secretaryship of a great Company, are astonished at the understanding and accuracy of this portrayal of a young man's inner self and outer deeds.

It is true that Sir Ernest Hodder-Williams did little more than comment on the diary written by Davis himself. But how well he explains it; how well he reads into its touching cheerfulness and its splendid sorrow the eternal truth that only by suffering and obedience can the purposes of God and man be fulfilled.

Davis has won his spurs. He bears the marks of his service in the Great War with honour and with never a complaint. His old chief and chronicler was proud of him then. He would be proud of him to-day.

R. PERCY HODDER-WILLIAMS.

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Introduces One Young Man

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCES ONE YOUNG MAN

THE boys in the office were, I fancy, a bit prejudiced against him before he arrived. It wasn't his fault, for he was a stranger to them all, but it got about that the dear old "chief" had decided to engage a real good Sunday-school boy. Someone had heard him say, or, more likely, thought it would be funny to imagine him saying, that the advent of such a boy might "improve the general tone" of the place. That, you'll admit, was pretty rough on Sydney Baxter—the boy in question. Now Sydney Baxter is not his real name, but this I can vouch is his true story. For the most part it is told exactly in his own words. You'll admit its truth when you have read it, for there isn't a line in it which will stretch your imagination a hair's breadth. It's the plain unvarnished tale of an average young man who joined the army because he considered it his duty—who fought for many months. That's why I am trying to record it; for if I tell it truly I shall have written the story of many thousands—I shall have written a page of the nation's history.

And so I need not warn you at the beginning that this book does *not* end with a V.C. and cheering throngs. It may possibly end with wedding bells, but you will agree there's nothing out of the common about that—and a good job too.

I think on the whole I will keep Sydney Baxter's real name to myself. For one thing he is still in the army; for another he is expected back at the same office when he is discharged from hospital. It's rather beginning at the wrong end to mention the hospital at this stage, but, as I've done so, I'd better explain that after going unscathed through Ypres and Hill 60, and all the trench warfare that followed, Sydney Baxter was wounded in nine places at the first battle of the Somme on that ever-glorious and terrible first of July. He is, as I write, waiting for a glass eye; he has a silver plate where part of his frontal bone used to be; is minus one whole finger,^[Pg 5] and the best part of a second. He is deep scarred from his eyelid to his hair. I can tell you he looks as if he had been through it. Well, he has.

He was nicknamed "Gig-lamps" in the office. He wore large spectacles and his face was unhealthily lacking in traces of the open air. He was in demeanour a very typical son of religious parents—well brought up, shielded, sheltered, a little spoiled, a little soft perhaps, and maybe a trifle self-consciously righteous. A good boy, a home

boy. No need for me to pile on the adjectives—you know exactly the kind of chap he was. One more thing, however, and very important—he had a sense of humour and he was uniformly good tempered and willing. That is why, in a short time, the prejudice of the office gave way to open approval. "Young Baxter may be a 'pi' youth, but he's quick at his job, and nothing's too much trouble for him," said his boss. And against their previous judgment the boys liked him. He could see a joke. He was a good sort.

Curiously enough it was the Y.M.C.A. that first introduced Sydney Baxter to what, for want of a better term, we will call the sporting side of life. There's a fine sporting side to^[Pg 6] every real Englishman's life—don't let there be any mistake about that. "He is a sportsman" is not, as a few excellent people seem to believe, a term of reproach. It is one of the highest honours conferred on an officer by the men he commands. And in the ranks "a good sport" is often another way of spelling "a hero."

It was, as I say, at the Y.M.C.A. that this one young man was first taken out of himself and his quiet home surroundings, first became interested in the convivialities of life. In those days, to be quite frank about it, a certain settled staidness of demeanour, a decided aloofness from the outside world, marked many religious households. A book of unexceptional moral tone, and probably containing what was known as "definite teaching," was the main relaxation after working hours—that, and an occasional meeting and some secretarial work for a religious or charitable society. Companions, if any, were very carefully chosen by the parents. Well, war has changed all that—it has even chosen our very bed-fellows for us. And no questions to be asked, either.

It is often assumed by those who know no better that such a home as Sydney Baxter's^[Pg 7] produces either prigs or profligates. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons of this book is to prove that out of such a home may come, I believe often does come, the best type of Englishman—a Christian sportsman, a man who fights all the better for his country because he has been taught from childhood to fear God and hate iniquity.

But it was well for Sydney Baxter that he prepared for the chances and quick changes of his military life by learning how to make the best of his hitherto hidden gift of companionship.

This is how it came about. He writes:

"One afternoon in early autumn a card was put into the hands of every young man in our office, inviting us to a tea and social evening at the Y.M.C.A. Headquarters. The chaps said to me, 'Of course *you* are going, Baxter?' and I answered, 'Why not?' They, however, seemed to be of the opinion that the tea was, more or less, a bait to a prayer-meeting or something of that kind.

However, several went, expecting, and preparing themselves for, the worst. We were welcomed by a group of gentlemen who seemed to be possessors of smiles of permanency; they conducted us to a large room already well filled with others like ourselves,[Pg 8] whom we incorrectly judged to be members, as they seemed to be quite at home. In every corner of the room were lounge chairs and on the tables games of all description. Here and there small groups were being entertained by the members, and, judging by the unrestrained merriment, they were proving themselves very capable hosts.

"We were told to make ourselves absolutely at home; and although we entered with zest into all that was going on, I don't think really that we quite lost the feeling that a prayer-meeting was bound to follow. Much to our surprise no one came up and spoke to us about our souls; indeed our hosts led the way into all the fun that was going, and none of them had the milk-and-bun expression of countenance that we had conjured up in our mind's eye. You can see what our conception of Y.M.C.A. members was. We imagined them a narrow-minded set of some mild kind of religious fanatics."

I promised a veracious chronicle, and I am quoting Sydney Baxter word for word. I am inclined to believe that here he is expressing his companions' anxieties rather than his own.

"The tea gong sounded and our hosts led the way to another large room, and upon the tables was a sumptuous spread. Being young men we did full justice to it, and throughout the whole of tea time this same atmosphere of sociability surrounded us.

"After tea we were escorted to the lecture room, and, although it is too long ago to remember who the speakers were, and what the subjects, I do know it was most enjoyable. At the conclusion we were given a hearty welcome to come and use the rooms every evening for reading, writing, or social intercourse and games. The following morning in the office we all agreed that we had had a most enjoyable evening, and that we had badly misjudged the Y.M.C.A. A few of us took advantage of the invitation and went again, and received the same warm welcome and had another enjoyable evening. Shortly afterwards three of us joined the Association. Until this time I had no idea of the magnitude of the Association's work; my idea was that little existed outside of the Headquarters and the smaller branches over the country. This was some eight years ago. Now every one knows the Y.M.C.A. I soon got into the stream and found I was in the midst of a large number of football, cricket, swimming, and rowing enthusiasts. The teams that the

Association clubs put into the field and on the river were very strong. The sports side of the Y.M.C.A. was indeed a revelation."

So it was that Sydney Baxter's evenings and week-ends were often spent with his fellows in various Y.M.C.A. organisations. He was anxious to get on, and the Association classes helped him, too, in his business education. Ambitious of advancement in the office, he had noted that his schooling was lacking in certain essentials if he was to be fit when the opportunity arrived. He rose quickly in the business and was soon doing responsible work. He was one of those fellows who get ready for the time when their chance may come. It always does come to such as Sydney Baxter.

The Association tackled the holiday problem for this young man too. This is how he describes his first visit to one of the Y.M.C.A. hotels. He calls them hotels himself, and I am not surprised, for such they really are. A "home," though a beautiful word, does not, somehow, in this connection convey the proper idea of these Y.M.C.A. holiday resorts. "A home from home"—well you know!

"I went down entirely on my own. I was at that time a very reserved chap, and I had misgivings as to the probability of making chums. I shared my room with a young Frenchman, who fortunately could speak English quite well, and thus we were saved embarrassing silence and aloofness.

"Tea gong sounded, and as we made our way into the passage we were literally carried along in the stream of young men, newcomers in their lounge suits, the others mostly in flannels. On we swept, down the stairs into the large dining-hall. Sit where you please, act as if you had been here all your life and treat everyone as an old pal, seemed to be the order of the day, and in that atmosphere it was impossible to feel anything but quite at home. Before tea was over we new arrivals were infected with the same spirit of joviality, and were ready for the first 'rag.'

"I was shown the house and grounds by an old boarder. In addition to the lounge, writing and smoking-rooms, there was a dark-room for developing, a fully rigged 'gym,' and billiard-room; and so, in inclement weather, every amusement was at hand. In the grounds were tennis courts and croquet lawns.

"Every week drives were arranged to the beauty-spots and historical places round about, but I appreciated most the facilities offered by a temporary membership of the boating club for the absurdly small sum of 3s. 6d. per week. For this one could have a skiff or, if a party, a large boat, any day for any length of time, bathing costume and fishing tackle thrown in. I took full advantage of this, and most mornings and afternoons were spent on the

water. We used to pull over to the obsolete battleships that lay in the stretch of water between us and the mainland. Here we would tether up and turn the gangway into a diving platform. Happy indeed were these days spent with companions who were in every sense of the word sportsmen and gentlemen."

Sportsmen and gentlemen—a new designation, perhaps, to some who have judged these Y.M.C.A. members by hearsay only. It's Sydney Baxter's not mine. And he ought to know well what the words mean after two years in a line regiment at the front.

One Young Man Joins the Army

CHAPTER II

ONE YOUNG MAN JOINS THE ARMY

SYDNEY BAXTER was most decidedly getting on in business. And then the war came. I do not want you to have the impression that, at this time, he was one of those sturdy, strapping young fellows who gladly rushed into the ranks for the very joy of fighting. There were thousands of them, I know, a glorious breed, but Sydney Baxter was not of that build. So that there may be no mistake let me give his own words. They are frank enough to be convincing.

"When war fell upon Europe I was one of those foolish people who imagined that the Kaiser and his army would be completely crushed before Xmas, 1914. For the first two months I never gave a thought to the possibility of my becoming a soldier. I couldn't imagine myself with a rifle and bayonet chasing Huns, or standing the rough-and-ready life of the soldier, and the thought of blood was horrible. I had worn glasses since I was a boy of twelve, and for that[Pg 16] reason, among others, I had not learnt the art of self-defence where quickness of vision is half the battle. From appearances and manners one would have ticketed me as a Conscientious Objector. I thank God I had not *that* conception of my duty to Him."

And so Sydney Baxter went on with his work. There was plenty to do. Reservists had been called up. Opportunities of advancement were many. Some must stay and "keep the home fires burning." You know all the arguments, all the self-justification of those days. His chance had undoubtedly arrived. He was badly needed in the office. You shall read his own confession.

"It was well into October before I realised the Call to Arms was a personal one, and that the Hun was not so easily to be beaten. The treatment of the Belgians hit me very hard, and, but for my home circumstances, I should have donned khaki straight away. My position was just this. My father had died some few months before, and left to my care my mother and my sister. Their protection was my solemn charge—there was no doubt about it in my mind. And yet, what was my duty? To fight—or to stay and look after our little home? It is a problem that thousands of us young men have had to wrestle with, and for several days I wrestled with it alone. Mother was purely

neutral; she refused to influence me either way. Mother-like she could not encourage my going, but she would never lift a finger to deter me. Her answer was that it was entirely a matter of what *I* conscientiously felt was my foremost duty. I never went near a recruiting meeting, so that I should not be carried away by enthusiasm to the recruiting office. I must decide when my thoughts were cool and collected. The second week in November brought the climax. I knew my duty was to fight.

"So I enlisted in a London Territorial Regiment whose first battalion was already in France and would require frequent drafts. I did not hesitate about joining a fighting unit. Other units are very necessary, but I wouldn't let another man do *my* fighting for me. I had some difficulty about a slightly weak heart caused by a severe illness a few years before. However, with the words that 'the life would either make or break me,' I was accepted for active service."

I am told that Sydney Baxter omits one thing here. Unlike so many in those early days, when he announced to the chief that he had joined, he asked no question about any possible allowance. He asked no advice, he suggested no help. He just joined. All he said was, "I felt I had to go, sir, and my mother says it will be all right. She says she will be able to manage quite well." Let me pay my tribute to this one young man's mother. There are so many like her that I pay it to thousands. Not only did she refuse to put obstacles in the way, but she would have no bargaining with patriotism. "She would manage quite well." It meant more boarders in the little home, it meant the breaking up of the old sweet privacy and quietude of the household, but—she would manage quite well. God knows the heartache and the sorrow behind the sacrifice she and the thousands like her have made—surely a sacrifice very acceptable in His sight.

One Young Man in Camp

CHAPTER III

ONE YOUNG MAN IN CAMP

WITHIN a fortnight this one young man was in camp at Crowborough. The contrast to his previous life as a city clerk, where mud was unknown and wet feet a rare occurrence, was marked indeed. The camp was sodden, the mud ankle-deep, and, what with that and the cold November weather, times were pretty stiff. He writes home:

"Our camp is about a foot deep in mud and slosh, and every time you go out your boots are covered and you have to be careful or you slip over.

"Our huts are like Church Missions. There are sixty-one fellows in this one, and all along the sides are our mattresses which we fold up. They are made of straw and are really very comfortable. The only drawback is that in the morning you find your toes sticking out at the other end of the bed. I must tell you how these beds are made. There are three planks about six feet in length, and these are placed side by side on two trestles about ten inches high. They give us three blankets, very thick and warm, and you can roll them round yourself.

"Right down the centre of the room are long trestled tables with forms to sit on, and this is where we feast. We sleep, eat, drink, play games, write letters, and do everything in this room.

"It's very funny to hear the bugle-calls. Everything is done by bugles. At 6.30 in the morning there is the first call and everyone gets up. If you don't—the sergeant comes along and pulls you out. To wash we have to run down to the other end of the camp and fill our buckets. There are only two buckets for sixty chaps, so you can imagine the scramble. For a bathroom we have a large field, and we nearly break our backs bending down over the basins. For about one hour before breakfast we do physical drill with our coats off. And hard work it is. For breakfast we have streaky greasy bacon. Funny—at home, I never ate bacon, I couldn't stick it, but here I walk into it and enjoy it. The tea they give us is not ideal, but so long as it is hot and wet it goes down all right. For dinner it's stew—stew—stew, but it's not bad. Of course,

some day I get all gravy and no meat, another day meat and no gravy. Tea is quite all right. We have plenty of bread, butter, jam, and cheese. All food is fetched in dixieys (large boilers), and tea, stew, and bacon are all cooked in turn in[Pg 23] these, so if the orderlies don't wash them clean at dinner time we have greasy, stewy tea.

"I am getting a bit used to the marching, especially when there is anyone singing. The favourites are 'John Peel,' 'Cock Robin,' 'Oh, who will o'er the downs so free?' 'John Brown's Body,' 'Hearts of Oak,' and 'Annie Laurie.' We all have little books of Camp Songs, and we learn them at night; it makes all the difference to the marching. One of the songs is:—

"Oh, Mother is the leader of society, and
You can see her name is in the papers every day.
She was presented at the court
For fighting Mrs. Short
Down our way.

"Not an exactly edifying song, but it goes with a swing. I can hardly keep my eyes open as I write this."

On the whole and considering everything—a wide phrase covering many things unspoken—Sydney Baxter enjoyed his camp life, but Christmas was certainly a hardship. He writes:

Christmas Day, 1914.

"All day yesterday I was on fatigue work, and did not finish until 7.30 to 8. We started the morning by building a hedge with bushes[Pg 24] gathered from the Heath, and then we unloaded trucks of hay and straw and built them in a stack. I got several stray pieces down my neck. After that we had to unload a traction load of coal in one-cwt. sacks, and oh, they were dirty and awkward too. We had sacks over our heads like ordinary coalmen, and you ought to have seen our hands and faces when we had finished. We could not get any tea, as we were expecting three more trolleys. After about two hours the trolleys came, and we unloaded some meat; it took three of us to lift some of the pieces. Then after that bacon, oats, tea, jam, and about 1,000 loaves of bread. We were proper Jacks-of-all-trades and were thoroughly tired out.

"This seems a funny sort of Christmas Day, but it will be all right after five o'clock. Of course I'd rather be in London and see you all. Still, all the same I'm rather enjoying myself this afternoon. I have a big box of chocs. by the side of me, and they are gradually diminishing. And now I feel in a better mood."

The Y.M., as it is now always called by the men at and from the front, played a very important part, an invaluable part, in Sydney Baxter's camp life. He writes:

"We were about twenty minutes' walk from the village, and at first there was absolutely nothing there to go down for, and we seemed doomed to a very uncomfortable winter. However, the words of a well-known war song, 'Every cloud is silver lined,' are very true. *Our* cloud was soon brightly lined by the Y.M. people, who discovered the best way to do it in no time. A hall was acquired in the village for the sale of tea and eatables, and for facilitating writing and reading for the troops in camp. It was staffed by ladies in the locality and was a real Godsend to us all. Picture us from 6.30 a.m. to 4 p.m. on and off parade, in a muddy camp, without even a semblance of a canteen or writing-hut, always within sound of the bugle with its ever-recurring call for Orderly Sergeants, tired out and wet through and inwardly chafing at the unaccustomed discipline. Our spirits were on a par with Bairnsfather's 'Fed-up one.' At the last note of 'the Retreat' we were free. Without the Y.M. touch we should have had to stay in our bleak huts, constantly reminded of our surroundings and discomforts. But these Y.M. people had provided a comfortable, well-lighted, and, above all, warm room, with plenty of books and papers and any amount of grub and unlimited tea to wash it down. Isn't it wonderful how many sorrows the British army can drown in a cup of tea?

"Apparently there's no need to tell the Y.M. people to 'get a move on,' for before two months had elapsed they installed in the very centre of the camp a large canteen, with a reading and writing room. It made a big difference to us, as we had the advantage of procuring a midday cup of tea, coffee, or cocoa, and such luxuries as biscuits and chocolate, also an evening's enjoyment, without the weary trudge to and from the village. As the vaccinations and inoculations were in progress at that time, the warm room was a blessing and eased the wearisome day which would have had to be spent in camp. More and more huts were erected, and more and more men occupied them; so a very large new Y.M. hut was quickly built near the camps and was opened in state, some fifty of us forming a Guard of Honour. It was a splendid building—its greatest attraction the billiard tables. Night after night we waited our turn for a game. At the long counter were a library and post office; the latter was most useful, for a letter could be written and posted without any delay whatever. Refreshments were, as usual, obtained at any time. There was not the slightest fuss; anyone could enter and do exactly as he wished. There is a genuine Y.M. atmosphere which makes a fellow feel 'at home.' It says, 'We are here because we feel we are "kind of wanted" here for your individual comfort: this is *your show*, and we are happy and anxious to do all we can[Pg 27] for you. Come at any time and bring all your chums.'"

Sydney Baxter's chief saw him once or twice during these camp days. And he marvelled. The spectacles had gone. The lank, round-shouldered figure had filled and straightened. Suddenly a man had been born. A soldier, too. This fellow of the pen and ledger, this very type of the British clerk who had never handled a rifle in his life and didn't know the smell of powder from eau de Cologne, who had never experienced anything of hardship or even discomfort; whose outlook in life had hitherto never stretched beyond a higher seat at the office desk, to whom the great passions of life were a sealed book—this fellow passed his shooting and other tests in record time.

He was in France within sixteen weeks of joining the army.

Those were very dark days in England, but the sight of this one young man cheered the chief. We were arrayed in battle against men who had been trained through all the years of their manhood, the whole course of whose lives had been shaped for this Day. And we had to meet them with—clerks! It seemed hopeless and a mockery. But when he saw Sydney Baxter the chief realised that often when the spirit is willing the flesh becomes strong; that the British fighting breed was not dead, though the black office coat had misled the German. How many times have you and I said "he was the last man I should have thought would have made a soldier." Well, Sydney Baxter was that last man. And he made a first-class soldier. Let this country never forget it. He, and the thousands like him, outnumbered and outgunned, fought the Prussian Guard, the most finished product of the German military machine, and halted them, held them, beat them. In equal fight they thrashed them. Think of it in the light of history. The greatest and most wonderfully equipped and trained army the world has ever known beaten in fair fight by an army of clerks, schoolmasters, stockbrokers, University men, street waifs, shopkeepers, labourers, counter-jumpers, most of whom did not know one end of a rifle from the other when war was declared. Sydney Baxter was one of that army. That is why I am telling his story. It will make strange and very salutary reading for Prussian arrogance—some day.

One Young Man on Active Service

CHAPTER IV

ONE YOUNG MAN ON ACTIVE SERVICE

SYDNEY BAXTER was sent with his unit to Rouen. He writes:

"We were tightly packed in a small tent at Rouen Camp. The following morning and afternoon we were busily engaged in being fitted out with extra equipment and ammunition, and so did not have time to look around. We had great hopes, however, of seeing the city in the evening, but we had to 'Stand by' and on no account leave camp. This was horrible. The tents were too dark to play cards, we had no reading matter or letters to answer, and once more seemed doomed to an evening of deadly dreariness. However, we decided to patrol the camp, my chum and I. As we walked off together we little dreamed that exactly one month from that day he was to be called upon to pay the supreme sacrifice of all. We walked round that camp, feeling that in each other we had our only link with home, with past associations. We did not speak much. Each had his own thoughts, each was subconsciously leaning on the other for support, for the coming unknown experiences. It was a cold March evening, and for want of anything to do, and in the hope of getting a little warmth, we decided to go back to our tent and turn in. I have tried to give an idea of how we were feeling; it can be summed up as tired and cold—and a bit homesick.

"It was just then that we spotted a tent with the sign of 'The Red Triangle.' We had visions of hot tea. An oasis in the desert could not have been more welcome. We entered the large tent; it was very full, and a long line was patiently awaiting the turn for purchasing. There was no shouting, no pushing or elbowing to get up to the front and be served first. The tent was really and truly a haven of peace—such a welcome port of call. On the small tables were magazines and 'Blighty' newspapers, paper and envelopes were given for the asking, and a gramophone was grinding out the tunes we all loved. We sat at one of the tables, so thankful for such a change of scene, and for the warmth of the hot tea. The same welcome, the same homely atmosphere, were here as in the other Y.M. centres. One felt, *one was made to feel*, that his was the right to enter and stay and enjoy himself each in his own way,

and that is why the Y.M. is so popular, and why both the taciturn and the jocular find their way by common consent to these Y.M.C.A. tents."

In a few days came the order to proceed to Ypres. He writes:

"We swung round into the station yard, and were allotted to our compartments, fondly imagining we should be off in a few minutes. We took off our equipment and other paraphernalia, and settled down for our journey. A minute or so afterwards the order was passed down that the train would not start before 7 o'clock, and that men might leave their compartments but not the station. Here was a fine look-out. It was only about 2 o'clock, and we had to look forward to at least five hours of weary waiting, without anything hot to drink and only bully and biscuits to eat. It was not a pleasant prospect, you will agree, but apparently it was nothing out of the usual, for the 'Association of the Red Triangle' was ready and waiting for us, and had a large canteen, run entirely by ladies, on the station. Here we were able to provide for our journey, fill our water-bottles with tea and our haversacks with ham, rolls, and fruit. This was the best refreshment room I have been into, and it was our last glimpse of English ladies for many months. These ladies are doing a splendid and most self-sacrificing work, for their hours are long and their duties heavy. I wonder if it has ever occurred to them how much their presence meant to us boys? For many they were the last seen of the womanhood of our race."

I wonder too. Will any of those ladies read these lines? I hope so—I'd like them to know what their presence meant to just one of the boys they have been serving so well. They will have their reward. I should like them to have just one word of a Tommy's thanks now. He continues:

"In our little compartment of six two were killed within a month and one wounded; the other three survived until the first of July, when one was killed, one was taken a prisoner of war, and I was wounded and rendered unfit for further service. When at last our train started, amid rousing cheers for the ladies and a fluttering of white handkerchiefs from the little group on the station platform, we seemed to leave the last of civilisation behind.

"Before midnight we were under shell-fire in the Infantry Barracks of Ypres."

He writes to his mother:

"My word we *were* tired at the end of the journey. We are stationed in the military barracks of the city, and have had a chance of looking round the

town. The buildings, especially the cathedral, are very much damaged. The only discomforts are the lack of food and the absence of money to buy it. Both G. and I landed here without a penny, but managed to borrow enough to buy a loaf. We know now what it is to be hungry; we have $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of bread a day only, and no milk in the tea, so you can see that what you want you must buy, and it's terribly expensive here, 6d. for a loaf, etc. But we shall be paid in a day or so. The only things which are really necessary, and which we cannot get here, are candles and Oxo cubes. Although I don't want to be a burden to you, I should like you to send 1 lb. of candles and some cubes. The candles are used for boiling water or tea, etc., in the trenches, and it is the only way we can get anything hot. Of course anything in the way of food is acceptable, but I can understand that you have enough to do without extra trouble and expense. Anyway, should any kind friends wish to send, please let them do so.

"We are two miles from trenches, and shall be going in on Sunday. A few shells are knocking round, but we take no notice and sleep well. Well, don't worry. We are in comfortable billets and with very decent fellows, and they have shared their bread, etc., with us."

I shall not attempt to picture Sydney Baxter's daily life in the terrible salient of Ypres in any detail, but that I may prove my words that he was a typical soldier let me quote just one letter received at this time.

"MY OWN DEAR MOTHER,

"I have not been able to write before as we have just come out of the trenches after being there since Monday. Thanks very much for sweets and letters. They are very acceptable indeed. Thanks for P.O. We have now been paid, and so shall be all right. Chocolates, handkerchiefs, etc., are fine. Neither George nor I felt anything peculiar when coming under fire as I expected we should. We were all right in the trenches, which are very good indeed. They are a bit different to what I expected, but of course they vary. It seems to me safer to be in the trenches than out; however, it is bad luck if you are hit. No one was killed in our company all the time we were in, and only three wounded, so you will see there is not much to worry about; and with some pay and parcels which I have received, and about twelve letters, I feel much better."

Sydney Baxter often mentions his chum in this record and I think the following extract from George's letter about this time may well be inserted here. The two boys

were inseparable until the last and absolute bodily separation between the living and the dead.

"Everything is going on all right with us. We have finished our first taste of trench life, and on the whole it was rather enjoyable. We went in last Monday and came out late on Saturday. The first two or three days were wet, so our opportunities for sleep were few, especially as at our part of the trench there were no dug-outs and our sleep had to be obtained in the open air. In fact, until the fourth day I only had one hour's sleep, and on the last day I managed about five hours. The chief trouble was trying to boil water, but we managed by cutting a candle into small pieces and putting this, with a piece of rag, into a tin, using the rag as a wick.

"Our five days and nights were on the whole fairly quiet; in fact, during the day hardly any shots were exchanged, most of the firing being done at night. During the day it was impossible to look over the trench, as we were only fifty yards from the Germans, so we considered it advisable not to exhibit too much curiosity in case our health suffered thereby. At night time the Germans use star-shells to illuminate the proceedings, and they always seem nervy and think we are going to attack their trench. If we start firing a little more than usual they think it is the signal for an attack, and they blaze away like fury. We had a good example of this on our last night in the trenches.

"Someone started firing, someone else took it up and in no time the noise was like the final end-up of fireworks at the White City. From that it got much worse, and I suppose they really thought we were going for them, so their artillery sent us a few shells; but they did no damage. Eventually they seemed satisfied that we were quite safe, so they wound up the proceedings.

"There is one lot here who, whenever they go into the trenches, shove their hats on their rifles, wave them about, and then shout across to the Germans to come out in the open and have a proper fight. Whenever this happens the Germans lie low and hardly fire a shot.

"One advantage of being so close to the Germans is that they cannot shell us without damaging their own trench as much as ours, so that, although we heard plenty going along overhead, we had none very near us."

One Young Man at Hill 60

CHAPTER V

ONE YOUNG MAN AT HILL 60

MANY have described in vivid, and none in too vivid, language the fighting in the spring of 1915. This one young man went through it all, through the thickest of it all. He can tell a tale which, if written up and around, would be as thrilling as any yet recorded of those heroic days. But I prefer, and I know he, a soldier, would prefer, to chronicle the events of his day after day just as they occurred, without colour, and without comment.

I print, then, Sydney Baxter's account of the fighting as he wrote it. I promised that this should be an altogether true chronicle, and it is well that some who live in the shelter of other men's heroism should know of the sacrifices by which they are saved. And then, too, as I read his pages, I heard a suggestion that we were all in danger of "spoiling" the wounded who come back to us after enduring, for our sakes, the pains he here describes.

"For three nights the bombardment had been tremendous.

"It was 7 o'clock on the Sunday morning when we first got the alarm—'turn out and be ready to march off at once.' We heard that the Hill—the famous Hill 60—had gone up and that we had been successful in holding it, but the rumours were that the fighting was terrific. We were soon marching on the road past battered Vlamertinghe. Shells of heavy calibre were falling on all sides, and we made for the Convent by the Lille gate, by a circuitous route—round by the Infantry Barracks. We dumped our packs in this Convent, where there were still one or two of the nuns who had decided to face the shelling rather than leave their old home.

"We were sorted up into parties. Our job was to carry barbed wire and ammunition up to the Hill. I was first on the barbed-wire party; there were about fifty of us and we collected the 'knife-rests' just outside the Lille gate, and proceeded up the railway cutting. Shells were falling fairly fast, as indeed they always seemed to along this cut. At last we got our knife-rests up by the Hill and dumped them there. Fortunately we had very few casualties. We started to go[Pg 43] back, but, half-way, we were stopped at the Brigade

Headquarters, a badly damaged barn, and were told that we had to make another journey with bombs. We were just getting a few of these bombs out of the barn when the Boches landed three shells right on top of it. Many of our men were laid out, but we had to leave them and try to get as much ammunition out as possible. The barn soon caught fire, and this made the task a very dangerous one indeed. Every minute we were expecting the whole lot of ammunition to go up, but our officer had already taken a watch on it and gave the alarm just a few seconds before the whole building went clean up into the air.

"We then began to retrace our steps along the railway out to the Hill. Each man carried two boxes of bombs. Just as we reached the communication trench, leading on to the Hill itself, the Boches sent over several of the tear-gas shells. We stumbled about half-blind, rubbing our eyes. The whole party realised that the boys holding the Hill needed the bombs, so we groped our way along as best we could, snuffling and coughing, our eyes blinking and streaming. We stood at intervals and passed the bombs from one to the other, and had nearly completed our job when the word came down that no one was to leave the Hill, as a counter-attack was taking place a few minutes before 6 o'clock. We had then been at it for nearly ten hours. By this time the bombardment from both sides was stupendous; every gun on each side seemed concentrated on this one little stretch, on this small mound.

"Six o'clock came and I heard a shrill whistle and knew that our boys were just going over the top. Immediately there was a deafening rattle of machine guns and rifle fire. And then a stream of wounded poured down this communication trench. The wounds were terrible, mostly bayonet. None were dressed; there had been no time, they were just as they had been received. Many a poor chap succumbed to his injuries as he staggered along our trench. To keep the gangway clear we had to lift these dead bodies out and put them on the top of the parapets. It was ghastly, but you get accustomed to ghastly things out here. You realise that fifty dead bodies are not equal to one living. And these poor fellows, who only a few minutes before had been alive and full of vigour, were now just blocking the trench. And so we simply lifted the bodies out and cast them over the top. By this time the trench was absolutely full of wounded, and our little party was told to act as stretcher-bearers, and to get the stretcher cases down. We were only too glad to do something to help. The first man that my chum and I carried died half-way down the cutting. We felt sorry for him, but could do nothing. He was dead. So we lifted his body on to the side of the track and returned for the living. This work lasted some considerable time, and when more stretcher-bearers came up, most of the cases had been carried down, so we

returned to the Convent exhausted, nerve-shaken, and very glad of the opportunity of a few hours' sleep. The sights we had seen, the nerve-racking heavy shelling had upset our chaps pretty badly. Many of them sobbed. To see and hear a man sob is terrible, almost as terrible as some of the wounds I have seen—and they have been very awful. However, as quite a number of the men had only recently come out, it was natural enough that we should be upset by this ordeal. Time and repeated experiences of this kind toughen if they do not harden a man—but for many this was the first experience.

"Early the next morning the whole battalion made a move nearer to the Hill. For the greater part of the day we stood to in dug-outs on the side of the railway embankment, but at dusk we lined up and received instructions as to the work we had to do that night and the following day. Our officers told us that we were going to the Hill to hold off all counter-attacks, and that if any man on the way up was wounded no one was to stay with him. He must be left to wait for the stretcher-bearers. Every man would be needed for the coming struggle, and although it seemed almost *too* hard that one must see his chum struck down and be unable to stop and bind up his wounds, there was no doubt that the order was very necessary.

"We started off in single file by platoons. This time we did not go up the cutting, but made our way round by the reservoir and the dilapidated village of Zillebeke. The first man to go down was one of my own section. We remembered the order not to stop, although the temptation was very strong. So we left him, wishing him the best of luck and hoping that he would soon be in Blighty. After this the casualties came faster and faster as we entered into the shell-swept area. The machine guns were sweeping round and were making havoc in our ranks. Gradually we drew near to the little wood just beside Hill 60, and were told to occupy any dug-outs there until further orders. It was at this time that the whizz-bang shell made its debut. We had not encountered this kind of shell before; it was one that gave absolutely no warning and was used for quite small ranges.

"We had been in these dug-outs for about half an hour when we were told to fall in and each man to carry two boxes of bombs. We then went into the communication trench of the old front line. At this stage our company commander was wounded.

"However, we got on to the Hill, and each man was detailed—some for firing, some for bombing, and some for construction. All the trenches were blown in entirely, and a large number of us, including my chum and myself, were detailed for this construction work. Under heavy shelling we tried to

build up the blown-in portions of the trenches. This was just at a corner leading right on to the Hill and part of our old front line. We laboured here all night through. Just before dawn the shelling increased, and the bombardment grew very terrific. All possible were rushed up into the crater to take the places of the fallen. Casualties were terrible, and the wounded came past our corner in one stream; several of my own friends were amongst them, and two of them, who had come out with me, were killed just a few yards away. This terrific cannonade continued until dawn, when things quietened down a little. Every one's nerves were on edge, and all of us were thoroughly tired out. In every part of the trench lay numbers of dead bodies; in fact, to move about, one had to climb over them. I sat down, dead beat, for some time on what I thought was a sandbag. I discovered afterwards it was a dead body.

"Shortly afterwards we were relieved by another regiment, and in small parties of tens made our way back into Ypres. This was done in daylight, and we were spotted and shelled by the Boches. However, we were only too glad to get away from that ghastly hell, and literally tore along the hedges down past the reservoir into Ypres. At the hospital, at the other end of the town, the remnants of the battalion were collected, and it was there that Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien spoke to us, congratulating our battalion on its stand the night before. Worn out, we lined up and marched back along the road to Vlamertinghe, fondly imagining we were going back to our well-earned rest (as a matter of fact that was the programme), but we had not been in these huts more than half an hour when down the road from St. Julien there rushed one long column of transports, riderless horses, and wounded (mostly of the French Algerian regiments). And everywhere was the cry, 'The Boches have broken through!'

"Orders were soon forthcoming, and we turned out, loaded magazines, and marched off in the direction from which the Boches were supposed to be coming. On our way up many dispatch riders passed, and each one had the same comforting message—"The Canadians are holding them." We went no further, but received orders to dig ourselves in across the road, and that in the event of the Boches getting as far as this we were to hold them until the last man. Fortunately the splendid Canadians had not only held their ground, but with terrible losses had pushed the enemy two or three miles back; had, in fact, practically regained all the ground lost.

"At nightfall we drew picks and shovels and made our way in the direction of St. Julien. We got to the Yser Canal, and in crossing the bridge met the batch of wounded coming back. This was not heartening, but certainly gave all of

us a keener desire to get to grips. On the side of the banks of the Yser we were formed into three waves and received instructions that we were going over in extended order to drive the Huns from the position. But the Canadians had done so grandly that we were not needed until the following morning, when, in broad daylight, the remnants of the once whole battalion, in single file, made their way along the hedges, taking advantage of every possible cover, up to the village of St. Jean.

"Much to our surprise we did not stop there, but went right through and came within view of the Boches. Immediately we were under the special care of their artillery, and within a short space of time lost half of our numbers. We had to dig ourselves in with entrenching tools, but after having got fairly decent cover, had to move on again over to the left. We got right forward into the front line, and found it held by a mere handful of the Canadians, who received us with enthusiasm and were so heartened by our reinforcements that they were more determined than ever to hang on to the last.

"Meanwhile between the two lines our wounded lay unattended, those who were able made their way, crawling and rolling through the barbed wire, into our lines. At dusk half of the Canadians occupying the trench made one rush after another to bring in their wounded and helpless comrades. It was a wonderful sight. Again and again these fellows went out, each time carrying back a wounded man. I was the extreme end man of our regiment, and so was right next to the Canadians themselves. Their officer, who was hit some time during the evening, came back with his arm in a sling, refusing to go down the line to the dressing station, as he preferred to stay with the remnants of his company. He was a most encouraging chap, and it was here that I noticed the difference between the companionship of these officers and men and those of our own army. The ordinary private would pull out his small packet of Woodbines and offer one to his officer, who would accept it with the same feeling of gratefulness as he would a cigar from a brother officer.

"We stayed with these Canadians for two days. For some reason or other the transport had failed to bring up our rations, but we did not suffer for lack of food, for whatever the Canadians had, we had too. They shared with us all their rations and kept us for those two days.

"At the end of that time, during which we had witnessed several attacks on the right, we were relieved from those trenches and marched back to the farm on the other side of the Canal. But it was not for a rest; for every night we had to go up digging and consolidating the trenches regained and digging communication trenches.

"It was on one of these digging fatigues that my chum was killed. He and I had been given a small sector to dig, and it was really a fairly quiet night, as far as firing was concerned. We had dug down a depth of about three feet and had secured ourselves against rifle fire and were putting the final touches to our work, which we had rightly viewed with pride and satisfaction, when the order came—'D Company file out towards the left.' We were terribly disappointed for we had worked all that evening on digging ourselves in here and we knew that it meant a fresh start elsewhere. We were just clambering out when there rang out one single shot from a sniper, apparently lying in front of the German lines.

"We all got up with the exception of my chum. I did not for a minute imagine he had been hit, but merely thought he was making sure that the sniper had finished, so I touched him—and he half rolled towards me. I lifted him up and said, 'Did you catch it?' All he could do was to point to his chin. He was an awful sight. A dum-dum or explosive bullet had caught his jawbone and had blown the left lower jaw and part of the neck away. I realised at once that it was hopeless, for it took four bandages to stop the spurting. One of our fellows ran off for the stretcher-bearers. One of these came back, but he could not stop the flow of blood at all, and the corporal said, 'No good: it will all be over in a minute.' I could not believe it at all—it did not seem possible to me that George with whom I had spent every hour, every day in close companionship for so many months past, was dying.

"The party went on and I was left alone, but I risked all chances of court martial and stayed with my wounded friend. I couldn't leave him until I was absolutely certain that he was past all aid. He did not last very many minutes, and I knelt there with my arm round his shoulders, hoping against hope that something could be done. He was called to pay the supreme sacrifice of all. And with just one gasp he died.

"I was in a terrible condition. My clothes were soaked in blood, my hands all red, my mind numbed. Nothing could be done, so I went and joined my company, but first made application to the sergeant-major that I might help to bury my chum. This was granted, and as three other men were killed that evening, a party of us were detailed to make graves for them. I can see now those four graves in a square, railed off by barbed wire, on the cross-roads between St. Jean and St. Julien. On one corner stood an estaminet and trenches ran all round. A chaplain was passing, and we had a service of a minute or two. The time was about 2 o'clock on Saturday morning. We were only able to dig down a couple of feet, and these graves must, I fear, have

suffered from the heavy shelling which followed, but I like to think that my chum still rests there undisturbed.

"How I got back to the barn that night I do not know. I certainly was not my natural self, and it was more a stagger than a march. It was impossible to realise that I should see George no more. And on the following day I had to face the still harder task of writing to his parents and to the girl he had left behind."

To this, written by Sydney Baxter, I add nothing. Not to me has it come to dig a shallow, shell-swept grave for my chum. What words, then, have I?

One Young Man Receives a Letter

CHAPTER VI

ONE YOUNG MAN RECEIVES A LETTER

GEORGE'S stepfather wrote to Sydney Baxter as soon as he received the heartbroken letter telling of his chum's death. To this letter from the father I devote a chapter. It must stand alone. In all the glorious annals of the war it is, to me at least, unique. Nothing that I can write can add to its pathos or increase its heroism or enhance its beauty. I leave it to speak for itself—this letter which will live, I believe, as the most beautiful expression of a stepfather's love and devotion in our language.

"MY DEAR LADDIE,

"Our hearts are breaking for you, and our thoughts and prayers are much taken up on your behalf. All along we have united you and George in our petitions, and all that was sent addressed to George was meant for Syd and George. We never thought of you separately at all, but just as sure as you shared all in common, so our thoughts were for you both.

"George's call home was undreamt of by me. It was dreaded by his mother, but I hardly think the possibility of such a thing had entered into the minds of his sisters or brothers. I cannot explain it, but I never expected him to give his life out there. I knew many were praying for you both, and must have rested my mind completely on the expectation of our prayers being answered in the way we wanted. It was not to be. And at the first look one feels rebellious in that God permitted his death to take place. But who am I, and of what account am I, in the scheme of things? Can I understand the infinite thought of God? Can I see the end, as He can? I can only bow my head, with a heart full of sadness, and accept the ruling of my God; and hope for a reunion with our dear lad when my call shall come. It was something for me, a stepfather, to have had the fathering of such a dear lad. It is a heart-break to me that that is ended, and never more in reality (though I expect often in mind) shall I hear his voice or feel his kiss, or see the dear lad, as he used in these later years to do, standing in front of the fireplace talking down at me on the chair or listening to me talking up at him on Saturday nights. You can picture him, I have no doubt. Now all is over, his place in the home is empty—but in the heart that can never be. His Mum (as he always called his

mother) is heart-broken, but very brave. The dear woman is worthy to have had such a son, and that is praise indeed. If she was prouder of one of the children or made any distinction between them, George held that place, and though I think we were all conscious of it, none of us grudged it him. And that is the greatest tribute that could be paid to him—when you think it out. We are all jealous of Mother's love. We all want it, and if one is first he must be good indeed if it is not a cause of trouble. And that it never was in his case.

"Now, my dear lad, I have a proposal to make to you. We received some money to send things out to the lads at the front, and there is some left. Besides, George sent some home, so that he might get what he wanted sent him without asking if I could afford it, I suppose. Well, I am to send you some little thing every now and then; you are to get another friend and share with him, and you are to make every endeavour short of cowardice (of which you are not capable) to save your life, valuable to all who have the privilege of knowing you, doubly valuable to your mother, and precious to your many friends. We feel we have a personal claim on you, and I am writing you just as I would were you indeed my boy, and we entreat you to bear up, to do your duty, to be a brave and true and Christian lad, and to come back safe to us all. Oh, what a happy day it will be when we welcome you back home!

"We shall always think of you as partly ours; and for what you were to and did for George we will ever bless you. Dear lad, get another friend to lean upon and be leant upon. It is a glorious thing—friendship. You risked your life to try and save George's. God bless you for it. I think He will. If you could read our hearts, you would feel afraid. I cannot write as I would like. It is in my heart, in my brain, but the pen won't put in on the paper. It couldn't. But it is there, a deep love for you, a great admiration for your bravery, and an earnest prayer that you may be preserved to live a happy and useful life for many years to come.

"Mummie wishes me to say how her heart goes out to you, and how she feels for you in your loneliness. Be assured of a place in a good woman's prayers, and be assured also that all of us continue constantly in prayer for you. We did not know how constantly and continually we could petition the Great Father till you lads went away. We will not cease because one needs them no more. Rather we will be more constant, and perhaps that may be one of the results of this war. Think what a power the prayers of a whole world would have with God! If only they were for the one thing—that His Kingdom would come, it would be accomplished at once! May the knowledge of His all-pervading love dwell more and more in the hearts of the people of the

world, so that wars and all kindred evils may cease and the hearts of the people be taken up with the one task of living for God and His Kingdom.

"May God be ever present with you, watching over and blessing you, and may He come into your heart more and more, helping and sustaining you in your hard task, and blessing you in all your endeavours to be His true son and servant.

"YOUR LOVING FRIEND,
G—— B——.

"P.S.—We have not, up to the time of writing this, received an official notification of our poor laddie's death. I felt I must write you, however. You will perhaps be able to read into my letter what I have been unable to say, but all my thoughts for you are summed up in 'God bless you.' Thank all the dear lads for their kind sympathy with us."

One Young Man in the Salient

CHAPTER VII

ONE YOUNG MAN IN THE SALIENT

THE city of Ypres, which Sydney Baxter had entered some few months previously, was now a heap of ruins. The whole country was desolate: the once picturesque roads lined by trees were now but a line of shell holes, with here and there leafless, branchless stumps, seared guardians of the thousand graves. On June 7th, 1915, Sydney Baxter writes:

"We have been having a very lively time, a second touch of real life-destroying warfare. Many of the boys have been bowled over. We have had a series of heavy bombardments—shells everywhere, so that it was a matter of holding tight where we were. However, I was again fortunate, and have proved to myself and to the Captain that I can hold my head whilst under heavy shell and rifle fire, although it's impossible to keep one's heart beating normal under such conditions.

"We are now entrenched for a day or two, but it is not over-lively. A corporal who was a fellow bedman of George's and mine at Crowborough has just been killed. The poor chap died in agony.

"It is indeed comforting to know that so many are petitioning 'Our Father' to spare me, if it be His will, through all the dangers and hardships of this uproar, and the confidence that the friends have in my return is very helpful. I have had the feeling that God will give me another chance of doing more work, but the thought of being killed has not the terror it had. The idea of joining George perhaps gives this comfort, but of course I know that it does not rest with me—unless of course by negligence.

"Will you include, please, two fat candles as you sent before."

June 16th, 1915.

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,

"Just a short note in reply to yours received this morning. I am still as per usual. Depends on how much sleep I get as to how I feel. As I was able last

night to get to bed before 3 o'clock, and slept on to 10 o'clock this morning, I am A1.

"We got drenched the night before last—every one soaked to the skin. We came out of the trench, and as there were no huts or dug-outs ready for us, we had to stand out in the rain for over an hour when we arrived at our destination. As the weather changed next day we managed to dry our things. It was a funny sight to see chaps walking about in pants, and some with sandbags for trousers.

"It is rumoured we are leaving here to go —, but being a rumour it won't come true. However, I shouldn't mind a change. We are all fed up with this spot.

THE ALCOVE DUG-OUT,
July 8th, 1915.

" ... How I long to be within the walls of our dear old church! Some of the fellows can't realise or understand when I tell them my church life and work are so much to me. I owe all my happiness to God through my home and to the associations and work at the church. I hope it will be His Divine Will to spare me for fuller activities and to make up for the sins of omission.

" ... Don't imagine for a minute we learn French out here. We rarely see a civilian, and when we do we say, 'Avez vous du pain?' and the reply is generally 'How many do you want?' They know more English than we do French."

LATER.

"The fight for Hill 60 and the struggle with the Canadians against the Hun at St. Julien has weakened our division, and we are to be transferred further south to a quieter part of the line.

"We are not sorry, for we feel sadly in need of a rest, and Ypres and its environments are *literally* a shell-swept area of countless graves. The H.A.C. has relieved us, and we marched back the other night to huts a few miles behind the line. The following evening we marched still farther back, crossing the Franco-Belgian border to the rail-head. We are having a few days' rest, spending many hours cleaning up, not only our clothes and equipment, but our ceremonial drill and exercises."

One Young Man's Sunday

CHAPTER VIII

ONE YOUNG MAN'S SUNDAY

July 25th, 1915.

"To tell you that I am at present on this Sunday afternoon lying on the grass watching a cricket match no doubt seems strange. But that is what I am doing—and with quite an easy conscience.

"We are some miles from the firing line in a fair-sized French town. It's a treat to be away from the noise of battle, and from sleepless nights, and in a civilised place again. We are only here for a day or two, however, and then on we go—or at least that is the rumour.

"We had Church Parade at 10 o'clock this morning, followed by a route march, and so we are free this afternoon.

"Two matches are now in full swing, 13 and 15 v. the transport, and 14 and 16 v. the new platoons. The platoons have licked them by 30 runs, 61 to 31 runs. I may say my interest keeps wandering from the letter, although no slight to you is meant.

"Now please don't think that Sunday is taken up entirely with cricket matches and things of that sort. When the Padre can get round to our battalion there is always a service on the Sunday. Sometimes a full-blown Church Parade, like this morning, but these are not what we call Sunday services. The real Sunday services are voluntary ones, either in the open or in a Y.M.C.A. hut. The fellows that go—and there are quite a large number—really go because they feel the need of such a service—not because it is a parade and they *must* turn out.

"Our Padre has been able to get round to us about every Sunday, when we have been out of the trenches. He is a very broad-minded chap—is not shocked to see us playing cricket on Sundays, for he realises that whilst on rest men *must* have exercise and enjoyment, whatever the day may be. I asked him once whether he would feel justified in playing a footer or cricket match on a Sunday, and he said that if he had been in the trenches for several

days, and the day that he came out happened to be a Sunday, he would certainly play.

"The services are generally held about 10 o'clock in the morning. We simply go down and enter the hut or tent and take our seats. There is nothing formal; the Padre is sure to be there first, and he sits about and has a chat with each man[Pg 73] before the service begins. The hut is more or less divided by a curtain or something like that, which separates the service from the part given up to refreshments, and we generally sit round in a circle. There is no set form of worship, and even the hymns are not settled beforehand. The Padre just says, 'Well, boys what shall we have?' and the men ask for their favourites, mostly the old-fashioned hymns, such as 'Abide with Me' or 'Rock of Ages.' Then follows a Bible reading and then more singing of hymns. The sermon is generally more of a chat than anything else. The Padre does not take a text, but talks of the troubles and difficulties of the day in the most practical manner. I remember one talk I heard on swearing, and another on drinking. The Padre didn't preach at us, he did not condemn us at all. He just gave good, sound, hard reasons as to why we should not do these things. These friendly chats with their sound common sense do us far more good than hundreds of stereotyped sermons.

"The service finishes up with many more hymns and the Benediction. But even then we do not leave. This particular Padre of ours has introduced what he calls 'get-away-from-the-war chats.' We sit round and talk about everything in general—of home, of books, and all general topics. His idea is that we should try to forget about the war for that brief half-hour or so. These talks are very popular; we get large 'congregations,' and these services really do much more good than the official Church Parade, when the battalion often has to stand in the cold for about an hour on end before the service commences."

To this description of religious services at the front Sydney Baxter adds the following note. You will remember that he writes of what he himself has seen and felt. He has fought in the trenches, and we who have not, have got to face life from his point of view if we are to understand and help him in the days to come.

"The majority of the men who used to attend these services would probably shock the ordinary church-goer. These chaps would occasionally swear, at times they certainly got too 'merry.' But this did not make them any the less good fellows. Unless one has actually been at the front, it's no good arguing with him or trying to make him understand the front's point of view. What man who has not been through it can even dimly imagine the after-effect of

continuous bombardment and heavy shelling? This I do want to say: the whole time these men were at the services they were far more reverent than many I have seen in churches in England. On leaving they would probably speak of the Chaplain as a *damn*, or even more expressive, fine chap; half an hour after the service one might find them playing cards, later on taking rather more than was good for them at the café, and yet there was absolutely no doubt as to their earnestness and sincerity or their attitude towards religion. On the whole they were a far cleaner-living lot of men than those one unfortunately sometimes finds in a place of worship in England.

"They were real good sorts. They would never go back on a pal."

One Young Man on Trek

CHAPTER IX

ONE YOUNG MAN ON TREK

It was on August Bank Holiday Monday that Sydney Baxter's battalion made its long journey south. He writes:

"We were up at 2 o'clock that morning, and for two solid hours were loading up the trucks with our transport, G.S. waggons and limbers. It was real sport and we thoroughly enjoyed it. A long row of flat trucks was lined up, and as each limber drew up the horses were unharnessed and we ran the limber right along the whole line of trucks until all were filled. The work completed, we detailed for our trucks. Every trenchman knows those trucks neatly ticketed:

40 Hommes.

8 Chevaux.

Forty of us packed into a van did not permit even sitting down, and we were very tired after our exertions, but the change of surroundings and the knowledge that we were for a time far away from the reach and sound of shells was sufficient to keep us merry and bright. The journey was very slow, and when we reached Calais it was just twelve hours since we had had a breakfast cup of tea. A few of us decided to run up to the engine and get some hot water and make some tea on our own, but the majority hadn't got any tea tablets or cocoa, and we hadn't enough to go round at a sip each. The cookers were tightly packed on a truck at the rear, and there was no hope from that quarter. And then once again, just as on other occasions where a chance of a hot mug of tea seemed hopeless, and where we were apparently doomed to a comfortless time, the Y.M. was at hand. There, as we glided into Calais station, we espied a long covered-in counter displaying the familiar sign of the red triangle. The order quickly came down, and was more quickly put into execution, that men could get out and go to the canteen. I have never seen such a rush. We were like a disturbed nest of ants. I wondered how on earth those ladies would cope with us, but I under-estimated their resources. As we came up we were formed into a column of four deep, and only a few were admitted at a time. At the entrance was a pay box. Here we had our franc and 5-franc notes turned into pennies, that the exact money might be

given over the counter to save any delay. When I passed up to[Pg 81] the counter in due time, I found that the first sector was solely occupied in pouring out tea into our quart mess tins, further along buttered rolls and cakes were piled high upon large trays, and at the last sector cigarettes of all varieties, chocolate, and nougat were obtainable. It was a splendid array of good things served by the ladies of our own land. Though, of course, we needed and enjoyed the hot tea and rolls, it was as much joy to hear our own tongue so sweetly spoken. The change from the deep voices of our officers and comrades thrilled us, reminding us of sisters and sweethearts just a few miles away, across the Channel, and yet so far off, for there was little chance of leave for a long time. What a pretty picture those ladies made in the midst of the khakied crowd, passing quickly from one to another with a smile for all! I am sure every one was over-stocked with chocolates and cigarettes, for we all kept returning to the counter to buy something just for the sake of a smile or a 'How are you getting on, Tommy?' from one of our hostesses. The whistle blew and we all made a rush for our trucks. The ladies stood in a body at the end of the platform, and as each truck passed waved and wished us good luck. The noise we made was deafening; we cheered and cheered until the little group of England's unknown heroines on the platform passed from sight. Our hearts were very full.

"And so we passed down into the Somme district, the first English soldiers to hold that part of the line."

Here are a few typical extracts from Sydney Baxter's letters about this time.

"We are at rest after some days of trenches, and of course are not sorry to be able to walk about and get a brush up—apart from the catering side, which you can realise is no small item. The weather has been very good of late; and while we were in the trenches it was fine but cold, which makes life more comfortable. We had a new system of guards and work last time, and it was a treat. *I never enjoyed a spell of trenches as I did that*, although the time spent in work and other duties and guards was nearly twelve hours.

"Thanks for chocolate, which found a ready home. Girls are not the only ones who like chocs., judging by the amount that disappears here. Sorry my last letter was censored. I am ignorant of what information I could have given; possibly I had a grumbling mood on and was somewhat sarcastic about the many defects and inconsiderations in army life."

LATER.

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,

"Just a line to tell you I'm A1. By the time you get this our rest will be over, and we shall be entrenched. Thanks for socks. The stove is going a treat. We finished a fatigue at 4 o'clock this morning and made some porridge. It was great, and of course up in the trench it will be trebly handy. We are taking up two big packets of Quaker Oats, and with the tea, cocoa, coffee, and oxo we ought to do well.

"Glad to hear about Herbert's wound. Sounds funny, no doubt, but he's lucky to get back at all, for he was at Ypres and it's hot there."

From a letter to a cousin in the United States.

"I have sent you one or two photos which may be of interest, and which may be useful to check the 'strafe Englands' of the German who comes to your office. Ask him, if in these pictures the Huns look as if they believe they're winning, and then compare them with those of our boys and of the Frenchies in the trenches, and with those of our wounded. My! there's just all the difference between them!

"I also send a French field service card, so you now have an English and a French one. I'm afraid a Russian card is out of the question, unless I get sent near them in the Balkans; and when I think of that I also think of a ditty that we sing, which runs:

"I want to go home, I want to go home,
The Johnsons and shrapnel they whistle and roar;
I don't want to go to the trenches no more.
I want to go home,
Where the Allemands can't get at me,
Oh my! I don't want to die; I want to go home.

"You'd better not show this to that German or else he'll believe we *mean* it as well as sing it. We have a rare lot of ditties. We often sing across—'Has anyone seen a German Band,' or 'I want my Fritz to play twiddly bits on his old trombone.' We really have a good bit of fun at times; other days are—crudely, but truthfully putting it—'Hell.' The first month I had out here was such. You heard of Hill 60 back last April, and the second battle of Calais. It was during that time that I lost my friend, with whom I joined. Since we were thirteen years old we've been inseparable. Only 40 per cent. of the draft I was on are left, and in my pocket I have a long list of chums whom I shall never see again in this world. It seems wonderful to me that I should be spared whilst so many better men go. Naturally I am thankful, especially for

mother's sake, that I have escaped so far. Only once during the eight months out here have I been more than ten miles from the firing line, and ten miles is nothing to a gun.

"Well, now I must knock off for dinner, the variety of which never changes. You've heard of 'Stew, stew, glorious stew'; perhaps, however, beer was the subject then. Well, I'll resume at the first possible moment; for, in the Army, what you don't go and fetch you never see, and then again, first come first served, last man the grouts."

"Here we are again; I was last for dinner, but didn't do badly by reason of it. I am writing this at a house which our Chaplain has put at our disposal. It's quite a treat to sit on a chair and write at a table, after sitting on the ground with knees up and a bad light.

"The trenches are in a rotten state now owing to the heavy rain and the snow. It's like walking on a sponge about eighteen inches deep. Squelch, squelch you go and not infrequently get stuck; parts are knee deep in water, and icy cold water trickling into your boots is the reverse of pleasant or warm. Then the rain trickles through the dug-out roof—that caps it. I really don't think there can be anything more irritating than the drip, drip in the region of the head. Then of course your hands are covered in mud, for as you walk along you need your hands to keep your balance, and the sides are all muddy as well. You come inside then and eat your quarter of a loaf for breakfast and go without for tea—the usual ration is one-third of a loaf, which generally is found sufficient. We get jam, too, and bacon daily, butter three times a week, and stew for dinner every day in trenches or not.

"Our sergeant took us to the whizbangs concert party last night. It was A1—one chap makes his fiddle absolutely speak. He played that Volunteer Organist and parts of Henry VIII., the basso sang 'Will o' the Wisp,' and most of the other songs were old 'uns. I tell you, you wouldn't believe we had such things a couple of miles behind the line.

"On Sunday I went to church. It was the hall that the concert party use. Right glad we were to sing the old hymns again, for we only get one Sunday in two months down here on rest. We had five bandsmen to keep us in tune, and, with a good sermon, the evening was both enjoyable and helpful. Afterwards we came back and I had a discussion with two others on Christianity, the

work of the Church, Salvation Army, Y.M.C.A., and other such organisations. It was very interesting, for one of them was an out-and-out atheist who was under the impression that Christians were all hypocrites, cranks, and prigs."

The last extract from a letter to Sydney Baxter's office.

"My! I should like to be back working at the business in *any* department. I reckon I shall not be much good the first six months, knowing practically nothing of what has happened since this time last year. However, no doubt, they'll find me a job somewhere. They'll certainly find me very keen. They say this life spoils you for the office, but I shan't be sorry to return to it. Mind you, I feel very much fitter and stronger in eyesight, less neuralgia and headache than before; but I shall go in for more fresh air and bring up the balance that way.

"The trenches are in a lively state now, all mud and water; however, now November has come I expect they will generally be in a damper state, and so we shall have to get used to it, as we had to last March.

"It has rained every day, and I can tell you we've been very fed up at times. It's hard to see the funny side of things when soaked through, caked in mud, and tired, but we feel different already after a couple of nights in our blankets and a few square meals.

"I am keeping very fit, although the last spell knocked me up a bit; but a little rest will do wonders, and I shall be full of fighting strength again and ready for the Hun."

One Young Man Answers Questions

CHAPTER X

ONE YOUNG MAN ANSWERS QUESTIONS

SYDNEY BAXTER'S American correspondent has sent me a letter which gives such an admirable picture of the day-to-day life of a Tommy at the front that it merits a separate chapter.

"I am glad that you like the idea of Questions and Answers. I should never have thought of explaining some of the things you mention had you not asked. Here goes:

"Question No. 1.—How do you find time to write so much? I've often wondered, as I should think you'd want to sleep when out of the trenches.

"A.—Well, for one thing, I am very fond of writing letters. To me it's not a bore as it is to some. To me it's a medium by which one can have a nice chat with one's chums (both sexes), and looking at it in that way you can understand. I write to you because I thoroughly enjoy the little talks between us. So much for the inclination, which has much to do with the time, as—where there's a will there's a way. When in the trenches the sentry duty usually runs two hours on, four hours off—all the way through. In addition, we get five hours' work a day. Now the total hours of duty are thirteen out of twenty-four: and as I only need six hours' sleep, that leaves five hours for cooking, eating, reading, or writing. I used to have a programme somewhat like this: rest hours at night—sleep; rest hours before 12 o'clock—sleep; and in the afternoon read or write. Starting from 6 o'clock one evening it works out: 6 to 8 guard, 8 to 10 work, 10 to 12 sleep, 12 to 2 guard, 2 to 6 sleep, 6 to 8 guard, 8 to 10 breakfast and odd jobs, 10 to 2 work, 2 to 6 read and write, and afterwards tea. This will give you a little idea. I have only two meals a day whilst in trenches, and cocoa once in the night.

"By the way, when out on 'rest' we sleep up to midday the first day, and as we go to bed at nine o'clock on the following evenings we get plenty of sleep. The chief advantage of 'rest' is the change of food and more exercise, which the officers see we get. Whilst on 'rest,' it's drill, etc., in the morning, sport in the afternoon, letters or reading in the evening.

"*Q. No. 2.*—Is a dug-out a hidden structure covered with sand-bags where you only sleep, and are there such luxuries as beds?

"A.—I think I could write a small book on dug-outs, then leave much unwritten. Let me describe two I have actually been in. My first was on Hill 60. It was a little sand-bag one that stood 3 feet high, 4 feet wide, and 5 feet long. This was shared by eleven of us, who had to take it in turns to sleep. This is the usual type of front-line dug-out. In most cases they are large enough to squeeze all men off duty into them, but of course shells and wet cause them to smash up at times.

"Another dug-out I have been in was some 20 feet deep with iron bars supporting the roof, and capable of holding one hundred men. This was not in the trenches. It had sticks some 3 feet high, with wire stretched right across, making eight beds. However, I always prefer the ground; the wire beds are narrow and not long enough for me. I'm over 6 feet.

"*Q. No. 3.*—Do you stay in trenches forty-eight hours without ever taking off your boots or resting, and how do you get your food up, etc., if you are on duty all the time?

"A.—When in the firing line a soldier never takes off his boots, clothes, or equipment except for one thing, that is to grease the feet with an anti-frostbite preparation. As for rest, you can see that with one man in three on look-out, you get a little rest, at least six hours, which I found enough. When in a big attack you are of course scrapping all the time.

"Rations are carried up by other men who are either on rest or in reserve. As a matter of fact when on rest you are seldom more than three miles away. The rations are carried up in sacks by limbers as far as the transport can take them—it varies according to the level of the ground and activities. These limbers are met by ration parties who carry two sacks each, right up to the trenches. Every sack is marked 'D' for company, '15' for platoon, and so we always get them. We carry an emergency ration of biscuits, bully beef, and tea and sugar in case of accidents. I have only once found it necessary to use mine.

"*Q. No. 4.*—In the battles you have been in, did you come face to face with the Huns, or just shoot at range?

"A.—Yes, once when we were driving them back, and once when they were advancing. Apart from that it has been shooting when a head shows. The nearest I've been in a trench to the Hun was 15 yards, but most of them range

from 60 to 150 yards. You see we are a rifle regiment and so do not do many charges, but occupy places for sniping, and relieve the line regiment after it has charged, and by the rifle fire keep the Hun from counter-attacking.

"*Q. No. 5.*—How do you get posts—are carriers in danger?

"*A.*—The letters are put in the ration sacks. The party often get some killed or wounded.

"*Q. No. 6.*—Do you get acquainted with French civilians, and have you picked up any of their language?

"*A.*—There are a few civilians in the deserted villages near the firing line, and by dint of repetition and purchase I have picked up a little, but I cannot possibly spell it. You see we do not enter towns.

"*Q. No. 7.*—When one series of trenches is built, how does the enemy get a chance to build close to them?

"*A.*—How? Why, under cover of darkness, either by putting a line of men to form a screen and keep up firing with men digging behind, or by digging a trench at right angles, and making a T. The first method is mostly used as it is quicker, but more casualties occur.

"*Q. No. 8.*—Do you have any fear of air raids over the trenches?

"*A.*—No, because a trench is too small an object to be likely to be hit by a bomb dropping from a height. The flying men would very possibly hit their own people instead. However they drop them on our rest billets. We get used to the shells, and this is only another way of presenting them.

"*Q. No. 9.*—What about gas?

"*A.*—They very seldom use it now. Our helmets are so efficient, they cannot do any harm in sending it over. They might catch one or two who were slow in getting their helmets on, but we have gongs to give warning."

One Young Man's Leave

CHAPTER XI

ONE YOUNG MAN'S LEAVE

HE again writes:

"We had done two days out of our six in the trenches a little south of Albert. They were in such a state that it was impossible to walk from one post to another. The mud was over our knees and all communication was cut off by day. At night we fetched our rations, water, and rum by going over the top—a little sought-after job, for Fritz was most active and cover scarce. I had just finished my two hours at the listening-post, and had crawled into my dug-out for a four-hour stretch. It was bitterly cold, and although I had piles of sandbags over me I couldn't get warm, and, like Bairnsfather's 'fed-up one,' had to get out and rest a bit. Two hours of my four had passed when word came down that I was wanted by the Sergeant-Major. Hallo, thinks I, what am I wanted for? Ah, letters! I was a source of continued annoyance to the Captain because of my many letters.

"However, he that expecteth nothing shall receive his seven days' leave, for that's what it proved to be. I stood with unbelieving ears whilst the Serjeant-Major rattled off something to the effect that I was on the next party for leave, and was to go down H.Q. the following night. I crawled back to my dug-out, wondering if I was really awake. Eventually reaching our post, I cried, 'John, my boy, this child's on a Blightly trip.' No profuse congratulations emanated from that quarter, but a voice from a dug-out cried, 'Good! you can take that clip of German cartridges home for me.' This was our souvenir hunter; he'd barter his last biscuit for a nose cap of a Hun shell, and was a frequenter of the artillery dug-outs. My next two hours' guard was carried out in a very dreamy sort of way. I had already planned what I should do and how I would surprise them all. Next day I was busy scraping off the mud from my tunic and overcoat. I spent hours on the job, but they seemed very little different when I had finished.

"That night I covered the three miles of mud and shell-holes to H.Q. in record time. There I met the other lucky ones and received orders to turn in and parade at 9 a.m. for baths and underclothing. There were no trousers,

puttees, or overcoats in the stores, and so we had to come over as we were, a picture that had no fitting background other than the trenches. At dusk we boarded the motor-bus which conveyed us to the rail-head. That old bus had never had such a cargo of light hearts when plying between Shepherd's Bush and Liverpool Street. At the rail-head we transferred to the waiting train, and it was not long before we were on our way. Bully beef and biscuits were on the seats, our day's rations. Never mind—we shall soon be having something a good deal more appetising. We did wish we had something warmer than the water in our bottles, and at our next stop we found our old benefactors. This was another platform canteen, and we were able to refresh ourselves for the remainder of the journey, which was all too slow.

"Two R.F.A. and one A.S.C. man shared the carriage with me up to London. We did not speak at all, we were far too much occupied with our thoughts and visions of our welcome. It was Sunday, and there were very few people about when we got in. I clambered out of the carriage prepared to rush to the Bakerloo, when a voice at my elbow asked, 'Is there anything I can do for you? Are you a Londoner?_' and a host of questions bearing on my future actions. It was a Y.M. official. He took me to the little box^[Pg 102] where my francs were converted into English coin, then to Bakerloo Tube Station, got my ticket, and with a handclasp dashed off to help another. Had I been bound for the North he would have taken me and given me a dinner, and put me into the right train at the right time. I tell you these Y.M. chaps do their job uncommonly well."

One Young Man Again in the Trenches

CHAPTER XII

ONE YOUNG MAN AGAIN IN THE TRENCHES

ON his return from leave Sydney Baxter writes:

January 29th, 1916.

"I am writing this in a small estaminet which is much overcrowded, and in the conversation can only be described as a din. Madame is hurrying round with coffees and fried pommes de terre, whilst monsieur is anxiously trying to find out if we are moving to-morrow. He is much disturbed, no doubt thinking of the drop in the number of coffees après demain.

"I am keeping very fit and well, and much to my surprise have not experienced any of the 'fed-up-ness' I anticipated on my return from leave. To my mind, there is only one experience to equal a leave from Active Service—that is the final home-coming. My leave was pure delight from one end to the other."

Sydney Baxter's Division was soon again on trek to a new position. He writes:

"We had stayed in, and passed through, many villages, had even had a fire at one, burning down one or two barns, and yet life was uneventful. Marching most days, or, when billeted, doing platoon drill, playing cards, reading or writing in the cafés or our barns. Company concerts were no good. We had heard all of our soloists' répertoire, which was *not* very extensive. There came the day when we marched into Doullens. Strange were the sights of large shops and smartly dressed townsfolk—we were more used to the occupants of obscure villages. The Sergeant-Major came along with the message, 'Smarten up and keep step through the town.' We needed no bidding. A soldier doesn't want it, you know, when he becomes the object of admiration and the recipient of smiles from the brunettes of France. On past the Hôtel de Ville we swung—this was a G.H.Q., and 'Eyes left!' was given as platoons passed the guard. Staff officers, resplendent in red-tabbed coats and well-creased slacks, seemed to be showing the populace what fine soldiers they were, while the M.M. Police stood at the corners directing traffic as only the members of that unit can. Into the Rue d'Arras we turned,

and outside an Ecole de Filles we halted. There was our billet, the best we ever had. In the playground stood our cooker. Upstairs we were packed into the classrooms, with just enough room allowed to stretch one's legs and to turn over should one wish. We had our stew, and quickly rushed off to see all the town. In the square a military band was playing 'Nights of Gladness,' and we found a crowd gathered round the bandstand, many of them civilians. We stayed and enjoyed the performance, and at the Marseillaise and our own National Anthem every khaki-clad man from private to general stood at attention, and the latter at the salute. It was a grand spectacle, and one felt proud to be a soldier. We went and had a look at the shops and into the church, until nearly 5 o'clock, when we debated amongst ourselves as to whether we should go back for tea or wait till 6 o'clock when the cafés open.

"Running into a group who had been endeavouring to break the camera, we asked them what they were going to do. 'Why, go to the Y.M.C.A., of course,' they replied. 'Is there really one here? What luck!' We all followed the guide. It was in a market hall, but liberally placarded with the familiar Red Triangle, and so there was no mistaking it. Like most other canteens of the Y.M. it had a long counter and about twelve small tables. The ever-refreshing cup of tea and the good old English slab cake were in plenty, and we asked for nothing better.... It was quite exciting to sit and have tea at a table. Afterwards there was a concert. The artists were A.S.C. men, and, although very markedly amateur, we enjoyed the evening, which was decidedly a change from our usual evening of cards. Unfortunately we marched away next day and so were unable to get full advantage from that dépôt. It was one of the Y.M.'s smaller ventures and lacked many of the usual articles of comfort that their huts are renowned for. However, it served its purpose. Troops were able to procure English cigarettes and chocolates, and at the same time have a good tea and a jolly evening. A toast to the Y.M. should always be drunk in hot tea, for supplying it to us in France. It's one of the chief blessings the Association confers on the army."

The battalion was soon in huts some way behind the firing line.

Sydney Baxter writes to one of his friends in the office:

"Glad to hear everything is O.K., and that you are still smiling. Thank God for that. Whatever happens, still keep smiling. The greatest tonic out here is to know the girls are working so hard, and all the time willingly and smilingly. We know you all miss the boys as they do you, and to read that our friends at home are enjoying themselves is enjoyment to us. We are out

to have the harder tasks, and we want you all at home to have the benefits. That's why we feel so bitter against the Air Raids.

"Well now, I am glad to write the usual formula. I am very fit and well, and not having such a bad time; things are fairly quiet this side, but not for long, I hope. Everyone is expecting a move and looking forward to it in the sense that it will help to finish the war.

"We have had much rain the last few days, and, as these tiny huts we're in are not waterproof, we wake up in the morning soaked and lying in puddles. It's the limit, I can tell you. However, we are on active service and so are not afraid of H₂O. Now, as to my Eastertide. My Good Friday brought with it duty. I was on Police Picket, much the same as a village policeman. Our duties are to see every soldier is properly dressed with belt and puttees before going out, and that there are no suspicious persons around, that all lights are extinguished by 9.30, etc. It's not a bad job, but on a Good Friday it's tough.

"Sunday was as usual,—Church Parade in the morning, and free in the afternoon, when we had a cricket match. Monday was the worst day of all. We were called out at 8.30, and from then to 12.30 had to clean up the roads, scrape mud out of ditches, and make drains in our village streets. Nice occupation, wasn't it? The afternoon was not so bad, but we might have had a holiday. Instead we had to go and throw live bombs for practice purposes. The evening, as usual, was free. That ends my Eastertide, and in spite of what sounds a far from good one I enjoyed it immensely and count myself lucky to be out of the trenches for it.

"I ought to have mentioned earlier that we are in a village behind the firing line, in reserve; we shall be having our turn of trenches in a few days, and so we are making the best of our time out. The weather is glorious, and we are having a good time. I do not doubt that there will be some hard work shortly along the front, but it's difficult to say what will happen. Only the folk in charge know. We only obey, and really it's just as well to be in the dark and so escape the worry beforehand."

The death of his chum George was often in Sydney Baxter's thoughts. He writes:

May 21st, 1916.

"I have heard from —; he also mentions to me the opportunity of revenge. I can quite understand and have felt that a life for a life would wipe out the debt, but when my mind dwells on these things I always try to think what George would have me do, and I know his answer would be: 'Why, the

German was only doing his duty. I should have done the same myself.' That is true. We fire, but we little know what suffering we cause. We do our duty and the Germans do theirs. It rests with the Heads as to clean methods or not."

The turn in the trenches soon came, and it was a rough turn too. The following are extracts from letters written to his mother:

June 6th, 1916.

"I have been unable to write before, as we have been having an extremely busy and horrible time. From the day we entered the trench till now has been one series of heavy bombardment, an absolute rain of shells everywhere—a whole week of it. How so many managed to come out alive I don't know.

"We lost four killed in our platoon, including one of my section, a splendid chap, cool and jolly. Three of us went to see him buried yesterday—we had a short service. His brother is with us, a boy of eighteen, and is naturally very cut up. We have now sixteen graves where there were none a fortnight ago. Ten whom I knew personally are gone—such is war.

"All of us have had a shaking up. To many it has been their first dose of real grim warfare, and it has been a sore trial for us to lie out in front with shells bursting all round and no cover. The natural tendency is to run back to the trench and get under cover. However, I managed to pull through, and feel much more confident of myself, and the Captain apparently is pleased, for on the strength of it all I have been made a lance-corporal—only do not yet get paid. That will come later. Of course, this is no big honour, but coming at such a time as this it shows they have some confidence in one's ability.

"There are so many senior in front of me that the possibility of further promotion is somewhat remote. One of our majors has got the D.S.O., one of our company lieutenants a Military Cross, and a lance-corporal a D.C.M., and so we have not come out without honour.

"I am feeling O.K. myself, and by the time you get this shall be back on a month's rest right away from the line, and until I write again you will know I am out of danger. Your parcel arrived whilst in the trenches, and was very welcome indeed. As far as cash goes, don't worry. Don't send any money, and don't worry; there's no need."

June 8th, 1916.

"We are now out on rest right away from our line, in our old village. We are not sorry, as you can imagine, and to sleep in our own little beds once again is lovely. I had a bath this morning, a nice change, and feel quite fit.

"Having now my first stripe, I have to go to No. — Platoon. They are a nice lot of fellows, and I shall be all right there with my old friend, another corporal, while an old section comrade of Crowborough times is platoon sergeant.

"As to wants—if you have an old shirt at home I could do with it. But I don't want a new one sent. Also a pair of strong laces, a nail brush (stiff)—that's about all, I think.

June 11th, 1916.

"Things are very active along the line, although very little appears in the papers. Our sector has been subject to heavy bombardments, and our first night in the trench saw three separate strafes, and the succeeding days brought a big list of casualties, which by now run well into three figures. The first strafe, which lasted ten minutes according to our artillery observers, brought 1,100 shells of all sizes from the Huns. I was half buried three times, and but for my steel helmet would have had a nasty scalp wound, whereas all that resulted was a dent in the hat and a headache for me."

There follows the last letter Sydney Baxter wrote to his mother before the great Somme offensive. He was facing the possibilities himself and trying to get her to do so too. I have not cared to print this letter in full. Those who have written or received such a letter will understand why.

"My DEAREST OF MOTHERS,

"Owing to increased activity at the front, I hear our letters are to be stopped and only picture, field, and plain postcards can be sent. Therefore you must not worry if you only get such. *If* I can get a letter through *I will*. I do not disguise the fact that things are warmer, for you can read that in the papers, and anything may happen any day.

"Thanks for the shirt, laces, brush, cards, and notebook which I received this afternoon; I had just returned after taking a party to another village on fatigue. The P.O.'s have arrived regularly, thanks, dear. I had a good lunch to-day, steak and chips and fruit after, at a little café where we went this morning. It was O.K.

"As you will have noticed in the papers, our artillery has been very active along the front, and it's when the Hun replies that most of the trouble comes in, for the Huns won't take it quietly for a minute and will send some souvenirs across. It remains to be seen what will happen.

"I like my platoon very much, and I have had a very happy time these last few months.

"I often think of the time to come, après la guerre, when we shall have the old tea-time chats, a smaller house and less running about for you, of the time when I shall take up my Church secretaryship again and also my work in the City. I wonder what they will put me into?

"Well, mother mine, don't worry about me. I'm all right and will be home sooner than you think, even if I last the war through and—I might, you know, unless I get wounded. And if I get that I shall be home sooner, and if I get the only other alternative, well, dear, it's merely a reunion with the others, and a matter of waiting for you. But it remains to be seen.

"Well, mother darling, I must now close. I'll drop you both a line every day, so don't worry."

The next line that both received was from a hospital.

One Young Man Gets a "Blighty"

CHAPTER XIII

ONE YOUNG MAN GETS A "BLIGHTY"

SYDNEY BAXTER'S Division was on the left flank of the British attack at Gommecourt, which met with great stubbornness on the part of the enemy, and resulted in heavy losses. He writes:

"I was in charge of the 'Battle Police' that day, and we had to accompany the bombers. We started over the top under heavy fire and many were bowled over within a few minutes.

"Lanky of limb, I was soon through the barbed wire and came to the first trench and jumped in. Some seven of us were there, and as senior N.C.O. I led the way along the trench. One Hun came round the corner, and he would have been dead but for his cry 'Kamerad blessé.' I lowered my rifle, and, making sure he had no weapon, passed him to the rear and led on. We had just connected up with our party on the left when I felt a pressure of tons upon my head. My right eye was sightless, with the other I saw my hand with one finger severed, covered in blood. A great desire came over me to sink to the ground, into peaceful oblivion, but the peril of such weakness came to my mind, and with an effort I pulled myself together. I tore my helmet from my head, for the concussion had rammed it tight down. The man in front bandaged my head and eye. Blood was pouring into my mouth, down my tunic.

"They made way for me, uttering cheery words, 'Stick it, Corporal, you'll soon be in Blighty,' one said. Another, 'Best of luck, old man.' I made my way slowly—not in pain, I was too numbed for that. My officer gave me a pull at his whisky bottle, and further on our stretcher-bearers bandaged my head and wiped as much blood as they could from my face. I felt I could go no further, but a 'runner' who was going to H.Q. led me back. I held on to his equipment, halting for cover when a shell came near, and hurrying when able. I eventually got to our First Aid Post. There I fainted away.

"I awoke next day just as I was being lifted on to the operating table, and whilst under an anaesthetic my eye was removed. Although I was not aware

of this for some time afterwards I did not properly come to until I was on the hospital train the following day bound for the coast. I opened my eye as much as possible and recognised two of my old chums, but conversation was impossible; I was too weak. The next five days I spent at a hospital near Le Treport. My mother was wired for, and the offending piece of shell was abstracted by a magnet. It couldn't be done by knife, as it was too near the brain."

Thus far Sydney Baxter tells his own story of the great day of his life. I leave it as it stands, though I could add so much to it if I would. Will you picture to yourself this sightless young man, with torn head and shattered hand piteously struggling from those shambles? Will you look at him—afterwards? It's worth while trying to do so. You and I have *got* to see war before we can do justice to the warrior.

The piece of shell which entered his head just above the right eye opened up the frontal sinuses, exposing the brain. "It is wonderful," wrote the doctor who attended him, "how these fellows who have been fighting for us exhibit such a marvellous fortitude." He had lost the end of his fourth finger and another has since been entirely amputated.

To the amazement of all, Sydney Baxter, within a few hours of his operation, asked for postcards. He wrote three—one to his mother, one to someone else's sister, and one to his firm.

This last postcard is a treasured possession of Sydney Baxter's business. It runs as follows:

July 4th, 1916.

"Have unfortunately fallen victim to the Hun shell in the last attack. I am not sure to what extent I am damaged. The wounds are the right eye, side of face, and left hand. They hope to save my eye, and I have only lost one finger on hand.

"I will write again, sir, when I arrive in England. At present am near Dieppe."

"*Only* lost"—that seems to me great.

Above the postcard on the business notice-board the chief wrote: "The pluckiest piece of writing that has ever reached this office." And by that he stands.

At Treport Sydney Baxter has his last experience of the Y.M.C.A. in France.

"One of its members came round the ward, speaking cheery words and offering to write home for us. It sounds a small work, but it was a boon to those of us too weak for even a postcard, or those who had lost or injured their right arms. The nurses are far too busy and cannot do it, and other patients are in a like condition. I always looked out for that gentleman of the Y.M. I was not allowed to read or sit up, and the days dragged horribly. Thursday evening came and many were sent to Blighty. I worried the doctor as to when I should go, and always received the non-committal reply, 'When you are fit to travel.' Saturday, however, found me on board of a hospital ship, and at 9 o'clock that night we arrived at Southampton. Ant-like, the stretcher-bearers went to and fro, from ship to train. For some reason or other they dumped me in a corner with my head nearest the scene of activities, so that I was unable to interest myself in watching the entraining of others. I feverishly hoped they wouldn't forget me and put me in the wrong train. I was not forgotten by one person, however. He was not an official, not a R.A.M.C. man—no, just a Y.M.C.A. man, ministering to our comfort, lighting cigarettes for the helpless, arranging pillows, handing chocolate to a non-smoker, with a smile and a cheery word for every one. He asked me where I lived and spoke cheerily to me of soon seeing my mother and ^[Pg 124] friends, and then left on a like errand to another chap. This, as I look back, was typical of all the work of the Y.M.C.A. Its helpers are always at the right place doing the right thing. That is why they have earned Tommy's undying gratitude."

Next day this one young man was being tenderly and graciously cared for in a hospital in Wales. He had finished his bit. To the office he wrote:

July 12th, 1916.

"The Hun has put me completely out of action, and I hope within a few months to be amongst you all again—for good, and certainly in time for the autumn session.

"The sight of my right eye has completely gone out, but as long as the left one keeps as it is I shall not be seriously handicapped. My glass eye will be an acceptable ornament. The left hand will mend in time; when healed, it will be pushed and squeezed into its original shape. Apart from the wounds I feel very well, and my rapid recovery has surprised all. The first three days in France were critical, and mother was sent for. However, I pulled through and feel as active as ever—at least, I do whilst in bed."

The hole in Sydney Baxter's nut—I use his own phrase—is healing. His hand has been more than once under the surgeon's knife, and he can now wear a glove with cotton-wool stuffed into two of the fingers. He sees fairly well from the unbandaged side of his face.

The chief tells me that Sydney Baxter will have the desire of his heart: he will be "back at business in time for the Christmas rush."

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